

# LEARNED SOCIETIES AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE DISCIPLINES

Saul B. Cohen  
David Bromwich  
George W. Stocking, Jr.



American Council of Learned Societies  
New York, N.Y.      April 14, 1988

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 5



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“A Question of Boundaries: The Response of Learned  
Societies to Interdisciplinary Scholarship”

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“The Cost of Professionalism  
in the Humanities”

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The American Anthropological Association  
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*The ACLS Conference of Secretaries organized for its April 1988 meeting a panel on "Learned Societies and the Evolution of the Disciplines." The speakers were Saul B. Cohen, University Professor of Geography, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York and Executive Secretary of the Association of American Geographers; David Bromwich, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities, Princeton University; and George W. Stocking, Jr., Professor of Anthropology, University of Chicago, author of "The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911," "A Franz Boas Reader," and "Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology."*

*Professor Cohen, speaking for geography, addresses the importance of structure within a scholarly organization. He seeks a balance between maintaining an integrated center — "roots, traditions, and intellectual integrity" — and responding to "strong inter- and cross-disciplinary currents" within the discipline. David Bromwich, basing his observations upon the field of literature, focuses his attention upon the individual scholar, whose central task is "thinking," or "arriving at an account true for oneself." Finally, George Stocking speaks to the learned society as "guardian of the sacred bundle." He traces in the history of anthropology the professionalizing thrust that marks the development of learned discipline groups generally in the 20th century but sees, despite "proliferative centrifugal growth," the maintenance of at least a semblance of "unified discourse about the development and diversity of humankind in all its aspects."*

*The Conference of Secretaries is an informal organization of the secretaries and executive officers of the 46 constituent societies of the ACLS. It meets biannually to discuss matters and issues of relevance to the various societies.*



# A Question of Boundaries: The Response of Learned Societies to Interdisciplinary Scholarship

*Saul B. Cohen*

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the Graduate Center, CUNY  
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It may be helpful to engage the topic of “Learned Societies and the Evolution of the Disciplines” through the following questions — “How can a discipline retain its roots, traditions and intellectual integrity, while responding to strong inter- and cross-disciplinary currents that enrich the discipline and yet may undermine its unity?” and, “How can the learned society guide this evolutionary process so that the development leads to positive, not counter-productive results?” It’s the age-old problem of searching for a balance between those energies that contribute to the healthy, integrated evolution of a discipline, and those that lead to its fragmentation. In addressing the problem and trying to shape the direction of change, the learned society must guard against becoming so protective of its organizational territory as to become an end unto itself, thus abandoning its proper role as the means for achieving the expressed needs and desires of its disciplinary practitioners.

Learned societies are under substantial pressure to find new structural solutions in promoting the continuing development of their respective disciplines. The mission hasn’t changed. Scholarly associations are still charged with guiding, from a discipline’s perspective, the process of problem articulation, theory generation, data handling, and knowledge content organization. But as each society pursues its role of disciplinary core and boundary definition, in an age of interdisciplinary thought and communication, it runs the risk of becoming overly defensive in warding off the perceived encroachment of other disciplines.

As disciplines evolve, their representative organizations adapt to new needs. Sometimes the adaption process is painful because

scholarly societies tend to be defenders of the status quo. One element that reflects this defensiveness is the “guild mentality.” Some organizations abuse credentialling in order to maintain a monopoly position. Even in the absence of credentialling, we tend to behave as tight networks, setting scholarly standards and identifying employment opportunities for our members, as well as providing the peer review processes which the academic world generally accepts as the basis for judging meritorious scholarship.

The learned society has a partner in its efforts to maintain the status quo — the university. Ties between the scholarly society and the university are intimate and synergistic. While clearly many members of a society are drawn from outside academia, it is the university that serves as training ground for entry into the discipline, and as breeding place and home base of its intellectual leadership.

To be sure there is competition between the university and the learned society. Especially in periods of teaching and research manpower shortages, a society offers members avenues of mobility through a national system of job-placement and cooperative research networking that undermines the efforts of the university to protect its individual territorial base.

But the effects of such competition are minor, compared to the shared benefits that both systems enjoy in maintaining the structural status quo through the university department. The department is an efficient and comfortable way of organizing the university, and of maintaining the political as well as academic status quo.

The department also provides the learned society with the university territorial base within which it can advance the interests of the discipline. Despite the growth of interdisciplinary and divisional structures within the academy, the overall impact of these non-departmental bodies is still marginal. The organizing core remains the department. Both the learned society and the university have a large stake in preserving this structure.

In light of the foregoing, it is no wonder that the emergence of formal new disciplines as amalgams of subdivisions of existing ones, takes a very slow, sometimes painful evolutionary course. But if new disciplines are difficult to create, informal clusters are not. Creative and restless scholars are constantly in search of fresh ways of looking at

problems and of generating knowledge. The result is that the segmenting of disciplines and the breaking of traditional disciplinary bounds, a process that has always characterized the advance of scholarship, is now increasing at an unprecedented rate. As individuals, teams and small networks of scholars reach across disciplines to communicate with one another, the tendency is to formalize these links, to create new structures. Twenty scholars who communicate across the world through BITNET, using computer telecommunications to communicate ideas and share data, form a social as well as intellectual network. These electronic mail “clubs” offer the basis for a far more intense set of interpersonal contacts than can the far larger, more cumbersome and impersonal learned society. It is up to the society to enhance this process, not to seek to stifle it.

Let me turn to the discipline that I know best — geography, to illustrate how a learned society has responded to the evolution of its discipline, and to social-political forces that have characterized its memberships’ behavior.<sup>1</sup> The struggle to preserve an identifiable intellectual core for the field — a common way of thinking — is unending. The more complex the discipline has become, the more diverse and specialized are its parts, and the greater the challenge to achieve integration.

The evolution of geography can be viewed intellectually and structurally in organismic-developmental terms.<sup>2</sup> From the Association of American Geographers’ establishment in 1904 to the end of the First World War, it was a highly undifferentiated learned society that responded to the needs of a simply defined discipline. Geography was physical geography and the body of theory was causation. The handful of members were led by William Morris Davis — they were, indeed, his “clones,” drawn from Eastern universities and mostly with geology backgrounds. This was the first stage — undifferentiation.

The second stage can be described as early differentiation. It covered the period until the Second World War. Land management, regional geography and field studies, with a shift in emphasis from causation theory to empiricism, developed from the base of Mid-Western universities to coexist with the Eastern physical geography base. The Midwesterners were now formally trained in geography, and the center of power within the AAG had shifted to them. The Association remained what it had been from the onset — a very small,

elite band of scholars concerned with research at the university level, and centering its publication efforts around the *Annals*. In 1941, AAG membership was only 167, and its function was still what a committee, chaired by Charles C. Colby a decade before, had reported on the topic of papers to be presented for the annual meeting — “The purpose of the Association is to serve as clearing house for ideas among mature geographers. It is not a training school for young geographers.”<sup>3</sup>

The third stage, which we might call advanced differentiation, took place from World War II until the late '50's and early '60's. First, the Association had to accommodate the needs of hundreds of young geographers, many in the applied field, who had been excluded. During World War II, they created their own organization, the American Society of Professional Geographers, with their own journal, the *Professional Geographer*. The ASPG, formed in 1944, was the successor to the American Society for Geographical Research that had been established the previous year and, in turn, was the offshoot of the Young Geographers' Society, first organized in 1937.<sup>4</sup> ASPG was a multi-purpose service organization, serving the needs of the many geographers who had been drawn into government service and at the war's end, were seeking university posts.

When the AAG and the ASPG merged in 1948, the former had 306 members and the latter 1,094 members. Now the AAG combined both the research selectivity of the learned society and the multi-purpose services of the professional association. These two functions have retained their adherents to this very day, occasionally in an atmosphere of competition and tension. But, overall, and to its credit, the Association has succeeded in providing a balanced response to the needs of both camps. This was also a period of disciplinary development with the introduction of spatial analysis and quantitative techniques, and the rejection of area differentiation as the essential and “ordained” way of conceptualizing geographic problems.

The fourth stage, from the 1960's to the present, is that of specialization. Not only did the discipline embrace new approaches — behaviorism, ecology, perception, Marxist analysis, phenomenology, humanistic geography — it also began to spin off a number of interest groups, first informal ones and then more formal, many with newsletters, and a few with journals. The organization grew to a peak of 7,072 members in 1973 (it has since leveled off at close to 6,000),

and its regional organizational framework has increased in vigor — with regional meetings and publications playing an important role in the life of the Association.

Specialty groups receive support and encouragement from the Central Office, operating under specific guidelines which include a floor of 100 members. There are currently 39 such specialty groups, as diverse as Africa; aging; geographic information systems; historical, political, socialist, and urban geography.

Geography is on the verge of entering the next and higher stage of development — the stage of hierarchical integration. At this stage of the process, the system is mature, nodes can interconnect through a variety of subcenters and the system can absorb outside influences without becoming destabilized. Thus, geographic subspecialties will be linked more closely to the core of geography, its regional organizational subdivisions will adopt functions related to the on-going need for frequent personal interaction and cooperative research and service functions, and ties with external bodies will strengthen the AAG as a whole as well as its specialty groups through more frequent exchanges of ideas and resources.

A survey has yet to be made of AAG membership in other traditional learned societies. The numbers of Association members of such organizations as the AAA (American Anthropological Association), the AEA (American Economics Association), the AHA (American Historical Association), the APSA (American Political Science Association), the APA (American Psychological Association), or the MLA (Modern Language Association) is probably quite small. Area studies organizations may have somewhat larger proportions of geographers. A review of the topics of interest to geography specialty groups indicates that most members of at least two-thirds of these bodies would benefit from being drawn into networks of fellow scholars in cognate fields.

Many members of the AAG look to other societies for certain services. For example, a recent survey of cross-membership in certain selected organizations shows that 28% of the AAG's U.S. and Canadian members also belong to such organizations in the geographical field as the AGS (American Geographical Society), the CAG (Canadian Association of Geographers), and the NCGE (National Council for Geographic Education); in cognate fields to the ACSM (American

Congress of Surveying and Mapping), ASPRS (American Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing), RSA (Regional Science Association), and to the AAAS (American Association for Advancement of Science).<sup>5</sup>

Geographers favor publishing in non-geographic journals because they feel that they can reach out to larger audiences, accumulating more citations and therefore enhancing their reputations and that of the field. But while such awareness exists, especially among physical geographers, Lee and Evans' survey of journal quality and familiarity raises certain concerns. The 172 American geographers who responded to the questionnaire (from a total of 500 sent) showed considerable unfamiliarity with many leading non-geography journals. The 32 non-geography journals that were included in the study because they were mentioned more than once included very few of the leading social science or humanities journals.<sup>6</sup> The problem, from this perspective, is to acquaint geographers more broadly with outside literature.

On the other hand, it is important from the discipline's perspective that such outreach not become a centrifugal force. As B.L. Turner, II has pointed out in the *Professional Geographer*, a small discipline like geography must make its mark on the broader academy, but what is critical for the discipline is that there be a proper balance of publication outlets for those who publish in subfields within and without the discipline.<sup>7</sup>

So geography as a discipline faces the essential questions that all traditional learned societies are facing — how can geography specialty groups become more integral parts of the discipline as a whole, and how can these groups advance the interests of their members through more sustained contact with scholars in cognate fields who are concerned with similar issues? The response to the problem of integrating geography's diverse subfields has been to rely upon annual and regional meetings, and the two general journals to bring people together. This has not been entirely successful, witness the growth of meetings and published materials of the specialty groups. For example, many in a specialty such as political geography find it more useful to read journals in international affairs, as well as the specialized one in political geography, while only scanning the general geography journals. And our national meetings are so overwhelming in numbers

of paper presentations, that the meetings serve essentially as times for affirming social contacts or seeking jobs, other than where given over to specialty group sessions.

The challenge of linking specialty groups requires that the AAG become proactive in shaping its organizational development strategy. Stronger regional organizations will help, but so will conferences between geographical specialty groups. For example, a medical or political geographer might appropriately join in with the group on aging, and members of the environmental perception group might find common ground in discourse with members of the Native American specialty group.

The other challenge, the flip side of the coin, is to encourage formal links between geography specialty groups and scholars within other learned societies without undermining the respective turfs. Clearly the need is for interpersonal access and for specialized materials. Again, one cannot be particularly sanguine about the efficacy of large annual meetings as the basis for creating networks. Some useful approaches could include a survey of specialized groups in cognate fields, and a mapping of potential intersections of interest, coupled with journal exchanges at reduced costs. At least, this is something to be pursued on an experimental basis.

In summary, the operational environment of the academic discipline is an open system, and the discipline changes rapidly as external inputs are sought out and absorbed by scholars. The learned society is usually a step behind these changes. But if its leadership reacts quickly and sensitively, the society can help direct this development in positive ways, thus best serving the interests of the discipline.

## Footnotes

- 1) P.E. James and G.J. Martin, *The Association of American Geographers - The First Seventy-Five Years*, Washington, DC: AAG, 1978.
- 2) Heinz Werner, "The Concept of Development from a Comparative and Organismic Point of View," in D. Harris, ed., *The Concept of Development*, Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1957, and Heinz Werner and Bernard Kaplan, "The Developmental Approach to Cognition," *American Anthropologist*, 1956, 886–880.
- 3) P.E. James and G.J. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- 4) *Ibid*, pp. 85–112.
- 5) From data provided by Association of American Geographers. Correspondence with Dr. Robert Aangeenbrug, 3/21/88.
- 6) D. Lee and A. Evans, "Geographers' Rankings of Foreign Geography and Non-Geography Journals," *Professional Geographer*, 1985, 37:396–402.
- 7) B.L. Turner, II, "Whether to Publish in Geography Journals," *Professional Geographer*, 1988, 40:15–18.

# The Cost of Professionalism in the Humanities

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Let me start by referring to a book in the philosophy of science that has had tremendous impact in the humanities, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argued there that what had once seemed to be, in an enlightenment story about the progress of science, a series of gradually widening discoveries that enlarged the domain of knowledge, had in fact been a succession of revolutions: each rejecting certain plausible discoveries for the sake of certain others that lay along the path it happened to favor; and each sometimes preferring such pragmatic virtues as coherence and order to the supposedly scientific virtues of testability (with respect to a hypothesis) and conservatism (with respect to established evidence). Thus Kuhn appeared to say that in moments of crisis the very shape of knowledge changed, so that, in any given revolution, the character of the knowledge won or lost was determined by the interests of the discoverer.

This way of looking at science, in the light of the sociology of knowledge rather than the facts of the universe, was by some readers taken to imply that even our securest assumptions about the world were conditioned as much by consensus, or what Kuhn himself called the psychology of research, as by a disinterested pursuit of truth apart from ordinary human motives. Kuhn for his part, it later became clear, actually thinks it is a fact that there are facts, that science does find some of them, that much of the knowledge that is thus gained may eventually be transformed without being destroyed. He is a believer in at least a version of scientific progress. But these complexities of his position did not commonly survive the moral that many people in the humanities read into his story. It came through to them something like

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this: “All knowledge, even the knowledge we once imagined to be ‘hard,’ is partly defined by context, including above all social context. Truth does not issue naturally in a right perspective on the subjects of learned inquiry. Rather truth itself is a product of someone’s choice of a perspective. Further, since the dominant perspective may change quickly, and several often contend at once for preeminence, there is no idiom of justification that will assure the claims of any one perspective over any other.”

It will be evident that even on a more careful reading than this, Kuhn’s argument might lead to two quite different thoughts about the relationship between knowledge in the sciences and the humanities. It could make one see the motives and conditions of scientific discovery as more similar than anybody had thought to the motives and conditions of, say, literary interpretation. Let us call this *levelling downwards* — downwards, I mean, only on a scale that runs from certainty to uncertainty. But the argument could equally make one see the methods and procedures of humanistic scholarship as more rational than anybody had thought, because more akin to the motives and procedures of scientists, once we have eliminated the ideal of pure scientific truth. Let us call this *levelling upwards*. Now an odd feature of the development of the humanities in the last 10 years — and, much more, in the last five — is the way that the self-image of scholars in these disciplines has passed through both kinds of levelling at once. In literature above all, there is a sense today that the scholar-theorist is adding to hard knowledge: the vogue of such words as “tracking,” “rigor,” and “determination” testifies to this. Yet accompanying it is a sense that the terms of discourse could change very quickly indeed and leave stranded all one’s previous interests, findings, rigors and determinations. But then (goes the consoling thought) that just is what happens to knowledge. The result of this new self-image for the humanities has been a weird combination of assurance and world-weary irony, traits once confined to the sort of libertine who was played out before the age of 30.

Of course the change of atmosphere I have described is more true of literature departments than of others in the humanities. By an accident of institutional arrangements, they alone have been entrusted, for a generation now, with the teaching of humane letters, of the great old books, of what has come to be called “the canon.” And they show

the change most visibly because they give signs of wanting to give up this inherited trust. Other disciplines, like philosophy and history, did that long ago: to teach reading at a high level was thought to be a task insufficiently professional or rewarding for them, and probably unrelated to real knowledge. It was natural for people in literature to envy the seriousness with which these rich neighbors added to their research by subtracting from their teaching along a whole range of possible encumbrances. Gerald Graff, in a recent and representative study called *Professing Literature*, firmly dismisses the complaint that a similar professionalism, if it took hold in literary study, would make for shallower conversations between teachers and students. "Such a complaint," says Graff, "leads nowhere, for it envisages no role for the professional interests of the scholar except to extinguish themselves." I think this paints too stark an alternative. There are professional interests, and then there is teaching, which is usually somehow related to those interests. The complaint in question says that we now risk forgetting the separate worth of teaching, talking, and thinking about books which are bound to relate to our interests, but which may relate to our published researches only indirectly. The novice literature instructor was never expected to contribute to the higher learning from a freshman class on *Hamlet* or *Don Quixote*. It was assumed that what the instructor had to say would merely add to the student's sense of taking part in a conversation larger and other than that given by his daily surroundings. This understanding has to do with an acknowledgement of culture not as familiar and acceptable but as unfamiliar, and distant, and worthwhile under a description one can only make for oneself. I mean here by tradition an awareness of the impalpable links that bind one person to others remote from himself, the recognition Burke thought more vital to humanity than any social contract, and which he called "a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art."

This is the idea of tradition which a self-conscious academic professional in the humanities is now likeliest to reject. It is only a story after all, and a story difficult to believe, perhaps nothing but an ideological construct (in which case the function of criticism will only be to say whose interest it serves). Such a rejection can be drawn upon to license particular suspicions about the worth of canonical texts. The last phrase however is somewhat misleading. In the sense in which the Hebrew Bible was canonized — made permanently meaningful and

put forever in place — by the Christians who renamed it the Old Testament, there have been few canonical texts in secular literature. In the history of English criticism, for example, both before and after the subject was studied in universities, Shakespeare is the only author who has been truly canonical for more than 40 years at a stretch. On the other hand, it is true that there have been reading lists that lots of people deferred to for a long time. The quarrels now going in the humanities concern how much continuity such lists ought to have from generation to generation, and the avant-garde position holds that there need be no continuity at all, except what is warranted by the demands of a given mode of teaching or advocacy. And here, avant-garde and professionalist reasoning are at one. Why extinguish what we know in advance to be our own political and professional interests?

Somewhere in the background of this tendency are strong feelings of both anxiety and inadequacy concerning the great books that are held in suspicion. How can I say anything true about them without reading the secondary literature? And in a book far out of my field, what reward is there in that? Still the feelings could not be as strong as they are without some cooperation from an idea of knowledge that the humanities have wrongly borrowed from the sciences. It ought to be possible to defend some kinds of reading and teaching without the pretense that all this some day will be knowledge. The humanities, at least, have often been defended on just such grounds; which a master of Eton, William Cory, once summarized as follows: “You are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. . . . A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours you spend on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment’s notice a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person’s thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. And above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge.” I want to devote the

rest of my time to saying how we have lost sight of the distinct worth of arts and habits.

One reason it has been plausible lately to attack a curriculum of old books is that so many of its advocates are conservatives of the type whose reverence for culture borders on superstition. People like this want the old books for the sake of what I will call the vitamin-injection theory of tradition. Crudely speaking (but the theory is crude), these people tend to argue that a faithful acceptance of the habitual loyalties of a culture may in itself help to fortify the self-esteem of a society. Read enough of the great books of the West, and you will see the point of defending the West. And in doing so you will acquire a lasting immunity to all the varieties of alienation to which intellectual workers are prone. It is a silly theory but worth noticing here because the present Secretary of Education is one of the people who believe it. The process described anyway does not include thinking about books, or interpreting them, or arguing about them in a spirit of self-trust. Rather one comes to the right books with a received image of one's culture, and then uses the books as primary documents to confirm that image: as if, only after having read them all could one say, "Yes, I found it *there*." For books to work in this way, however, one must have been finding what one was expected to find. A curriculum used like this becomes a machine for coming of age in a culture; and the culture in question it must appear is that of a museum only.

Clever up-to-date academics have no trouble making fun of this conservative theory. They can give more objections than I just did, and they always have a good time doing it. But their own ideas are really no better. For short, let me call their iconoclastic view the onion-skin theory of culture. This will take more time to explain than the vitamins. There is a concept of human personality, broached by a character in Hermann Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf*, according to which the layers of a character are just like the skins of an onion. Start to peel them away and you will go on peeling until you arrive at nothing. It follows (if one thinks through the metaphor) that there is no deep or shallow in matters of character. What the iconoclasts are saying is that there is no deep or shallow in matters of culture. Accordingly, once we have seen that any consensus in education is founded on nothing stable — nothing, anyway, more stable than social coherence, political agreement, personal and moral belief — then we can take pleasure in

finding that all education has become a scene of “dissensus”: a barbarous new word, current in American studies, but one that nicely fits the general pattern in the humanities. The onion-skin theory of education, which is also a theory of cultural liberation, would be credible if we could be sure of one thing. For it assumes that in unmasking layer after layer of cultural meaning, to expose the context, grounding, and presuppositions in which meaning is embedded — that in performing all this work, the reader will learn something that has not been planted there already. But what hope is there of that? This, more or less historicist, therapy of unloading meanings is, like the anti-historicist therapy of loading them, a Socratic game that only one can play, and in the classroom that one is the teacher. It would be hard to show that either technique is congenial to thinking.

Thinking I take to be the process of creating, through reflection and judgment and, when necessary, invention rather than mere acceptance, a relation true for oneself between certain parts of one’s experience and certain parts of the world. “True for oneself” because thinking goes on in a single mind. It cannot be done, though it may be helped or hindered, by a school, a guild, a network, a profession, a learned society or corporate body of any imaginable kind. Many of the heroes of American culture — Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, William James, Marianne Moore, to some no closer to the present — work from a similar premise. But it is a premise that both of the theories named above agree only in despising. For them, thinking is always subordinate to the large purposes of a culture — purposes, in the command of which individual thought and language is supposed to be ordered by a discourse already in place. Beside this point of general concurrence, their dispute about whether the ends of Western culture are beneficent or the reverse is a comparatively trivial affair. The evidence therefore suggests to me that in our time, a belief in the arts and habits of thinking about oneself through books is exposed to an unexampled assault from two apparently opposite impulses. They represent the voices of professional and cultural conformity, with a professional and cultural distrust of the individual mind.

Having taken the argument this far, I am not sure that it has enough implications, respecting the work of learned societies, even to justify my presence here today. But maybe the message (to call it that) is simply the good of encouraging thought in whatever shape, and the

good of discouraging an ever more refined academic professionalism (including every variety of dissent that needs an *ism* to establish its identity). Doubtless this sounds obscure. But it is not at all obscure in its applications. The voice to distrust is the “we”-voice of collective judgment. “One of our best recent studies of X,” “A perspective that will help us inestimably in the advanced discussions of Y,” “Clearly a Z that we will be learning from for a long time to come.” Conformity needs this voice — will never go without it for long — because the solitude in which a great book is written and read is something it wants to forget. In the study that I mentioned earlier, Gerald Graff endorses as good medicine for the humanities a proposal by another scholar: “We need to teach not texts themselves but how we situate ourselves in reference to those texts.” How many *we*’s are here! And in a mood of such more than fraternal solidarity, who will be so tactless as to object that we do not even know who we are, except in the long run. Certainly we, who read, and some other earlier we, give the context for every word that has a meaning for us. But the problem of thinking comes back however we avoid it, from certain passages in the work of a great writer. It will touch the reader of Wordsworth’s phrase, in his ode about childhood, which speaks of “the faith that looks through death,” and evidently has no religious consolation in view. It is there even for the reader of Swift’s remark that climbing is done in the same posture as creeping. We do consciously and unconsciously always situate ourselves with respect to texts. And yet powerful words also, perhaps otherwise, situate themselves in a mind that thinks.

The humanities have for most of two centuries tried to say something intelligent about the first sort of activity, but they have traced to the second a surer reason for their own existence among the subjects of a curriculum, and I do not think they were wrong to do so. But from a misguided analogy with both the social and natural sciences, from the anxious sense of a profession that depresses every sense of a vocation, and from the idea that research and teaching ought to be as closely related as knowledge and reading are reputed to be, there is some chance that the first sort of activity will come to displace the second entirely. If a scholar of the humanities ceased to be, in Panofsky’s great phrase, one who rejects authority because he embraces tradition, and became instead one who embraces authority because he rejects tradition, I am unable to predict the consequences

but I see no reason to suppose the result would be happy for education or for culture. The learned societies can help at this moment by using to advantage the fact that they exist. Just when we in the humanities (and by “we” I do mean all of us) are increasingly reluctant to say what we stand for, or what our work would mean if it turned out not to be knowledge, you can help simply by opening the discussion of these matters outside the universities, where, like any discussion confined to a settled group, it is rapidly growing airless and stupid. You can set flowing the intelligent energies of public opinion, which, once they start to work, are a remedy for the asceticism of the solitary reader, as much as for the craft and cunning of a profession.

# Guardians of the Sacred Bundle: The American Anthropological Association and the Representation of Holistic Anthropology

*George W. Stocking, Jr.*

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In the years around 1900, Franz Boas, the most important single founder of the discipline of anthropology in this country, made various statements about its nature and future as an institutionalized inquiry. As a means of providing focus for a necessarily superficial overview of a complex historical topic, I would like to consider two of these statements briefly. One of them took the form of an activity: Boas' role in the founding of the American Anthropological Association in 1902 (Stocking 1960); the second consists of comments Boas made about the unity of anthropology in his talk on "The History of Anthropology" at the scientific sessions of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 (in Stocking 1974). Both of these statements were, either explicitly or implicitly, prognostications; both of them may be regarded as at once foresighted and imperfectly predictive. Considered together, they will provide a theme for the remarks I have been asked to make, from the point of view of anthropology, about "the progress of disciplines in relation to professional organizations and learned societies."

Prior to 1902, the institutionalization of anthropology in the United States was focused in three major centers — although each center was also involved in field research elsewhere in the continental United States. In Washington, D.C., there was a well-established corps of government anthropologists, employed by the Bureau of American Ethnology and the United States National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, who were on the whole strongly committed to social evolutionism, and who since 1890 had been organized in the Anthropological Society of Washington, the publishers of the *American Anthropologist*. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, there was a smaller group of somewhat less doctrinaire archeologically oriented anthropologists at the Peabody Museum under Frederick W. Putnam, who

since 1890 had been training graduate students at Harvard University. And in New York, under the leadership of Boas, there was a group of anthropologists at Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History, who were critical of evolutionism, and who were associated with the American Ethnological Society, a preevolutionary anthropological group gone moribund in the 1860's which had been revived by Boas in the late 1890's. Once a year, Section H of the peripatetic American Association for the Advancement of Science provided a kind of national forum for these three groups, and for devotees of anthropology outside the major centers (cf. Stocking 1976).

In the fall of 1901, Boas joined W J McGee, the acting chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology, in exploring the possibility of organizing a national anthropological organization. In the course of their planning activities over the next few months, a clear difference in perspective became evident. McGee, a frontiersman with no academic connection who had moved easily from amateur natural history to semi-professional geologizing before sliding across into anthropology to replace his ailing mentor John Wesley Powell, favored an "inclusive" membership policy. Boas, who had been dismayed by his experience in mixed societies in which "the lay members largely outnumber the scientific contributors," and who was engaged in building an academic anthropology that would provide a rigor analogous to that of his own academic training in physics, favored an "exclusive" principle. McGee won the battle, insofar as the American Anthropological Association was founded in "inclusive" terms, but Boas won the war. This was in part because of constitutional modifications that kept control of the Association in the hands of its officers and Council; but to a greater extent, it was because Boas was systematically producing new anthropologists in his own image, several of whom went to work in government bureaus, under evolutionists who left no academic progeny of their own.

The new national association was inclusive also in another respect. When Boas defined the domain of anthropological knowledge in 1904, it consisted of "the biological history of mankind in all its varieties; linguistics applied to people without written languages; the ethnology of people without historic records; and prehistoric archeology." This description corresponds to the "four fields" of academic anthropology as it was to develop in the United States, in sharp contrast to

continental Europe, and, to a lesser extent, Great Britain. In Boas' own research, which included significant contributions to all four subdisciplines, anthropology was still unified by an underlying historical perspective: linguistic, ethnology, archeology, and physical anthropology all provided evidence of the recent historical differentiation of human groups. So also, in a longer evolutionary perspective, McGee and other evolutionists assumed (although on the basis of methodological assumptions that Boas criticized) that each of these four inquires provided evidence of the generalized development of humankind from a mute and cultureless primate form. Boas, however, felt that the unity of the inquiries that contributed to anthropology was an historically contingent phenomenon, and that there were already "indications of its breaking up." The "biological, linguistic and ethnologic-archeological methods [were] so distinct" that the time was "rapidly drawing near" when the two former branches of anthropology would be taken over by specialists in those disciplines, and "anthropology pure and simple [would] deal with the customs and beliefs of the less civilized peoples only. . . ." (in Stocking 1974:35).

To a great extent, Boas' prediction has in fact been born out; insofar as it has not, this may largely be due to the fact that the American Anthropological Association was founded to include in principle all four subdisciplines, and because the limited institutional unity thus created has been sustained at several critical moments when the centrifugal subdisciplinary forces threatened its fragmentation. That these centrifugal forces were resisted has been due in part to the potency of a normative image of a "holistic" anthropology that has been infrequently and imperfectly realized in actual disciplinary practice, and in part to the pragmatic need to represent a unified "anthropology" to the world outside the discipline. In the remainder of these brief remarks, I would like to look at several episodes when the unity of what some of my colleagues at Chicago disparagingly call the "sacred bundle" was reasserted.

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Of the 70 anthropologists who have served as president of the Association since its founding, only one contributed in a substantial way to as many as three of the discipline's "four fields": Alfred Kroeber, Boas' senior student and successor as "grand old man" of anthropology

(cf. Frantz 1981). During the interwar years, the fragmenting tendencies foreseen by Boas picked up force, as separate professional associations were formed not only in physical anthropology and linguistics, but also in anthropological archeology. The diachronic orientation that had sustained the linkage of ethnology to the other three sub-disciplines was greatly attenuated, as ethnographers focused increasingly on the study of behavioral processes in a shallow “ethnographic present.” Turning from natural history toward the social sciences, ethnology was gradually transformed into what came to be called “cultural” or, for some, “social anthropology.” With the ending of the “museum period” (cf. Stocking 1985), anthropology became one of the most highly academicized of all the social sciences. Even so, the activities of a number of anthropologists in government during the New Deal and World War II provided the basis for yet another anthropological association, the Society for Applied Anthropology.

With half of professional anthropologists engaged in some kind of war work, Washington D.C., became once again a major center of power in the profession — and of dissatisfaction with its existing institutional structure, especially among a number of younger anthropologists who had received their Ph.D.’s in the interwar period, and who were not yet represented in the Association’s leadership. Echoing Boas’ fears of amateur dominance, these younger anthropologists were fearful that the rise of alternative organizations would reduce the Association to an organization of ethnologists, unable to “pull its weight” with the various interdisciplinary research councils, or adequately to “promote anthropology” in the national science legislation that was then already on the horizon. In 1945, an attempt was made to found an “American Society of Professional Anthropologists” that could mobilize the resources of the profession for a wide range of both internally and externally oriented activities — in contrast to the Association, which, save for its publication work, was largely dormant between annual meetings.

The outcome of this process, however, was not — as in Great Britain at the same historical moment — a separate professional grouping of social or cultural anthropologists. The dissidents themselves retained, for both pragmatic and normative reasons, a vision of the “essential core” of anthropology as “the comparative study of human biology, culture and language” (Stocking 1976:38). The

reorganization compromise of 1947 did provide for changes in the Association's structure (including the restriction of voting privileges to a newly created category of "Fellows," and the creation of an Executive Board and a Secretariat), and the next several elections saw a clear generational transition in the officers of the Association. But as the noticeably greater representation of archeologists among the Association's presidents of the next decade attests, the whole episode seems in retrospect most notable as a statement that an integrated embracive discipline claiming for itself the status of a "science" would be more effective than a congeries of independent sub-disciplines in representing the needs of professional anthropologists in the brave new postwar world of governmentally subsidized science (cf. Frantz 1974).

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In the neo-evolutionary milieu of the post-war decade, it was still possible for a symposium on *Anthropology Today* to encompass all the fields of anthropology in what could be regarded as a single intellectual framework — which Kroeber, as surviving elder statesman of the embracive tradition, was instrumental in defining. But over the next four decades, the volumes of the *Biennial* and (since 1972) the *Annual Review of Anthropology* document a history of proliferative centrifugal growth, as review articles originally organized in terms of four "core chapters" gradually diversified to cover an ever broader range of adjectival anthropologies: economic, political, medical, legal, and many more — with the unifying "four fields" manifest primarily in the categories of the volume indices. While the volume prefaces still referred occasionally to "the discipline," the most revealing such comment was one expressing "a certain uneasiness felt by some of our colleagues about what it is that remains to [it]" (*Annual Review of Anthropology* 1976; cf. Stocking 1987).

Substantive diversification, however, was not the only factor contributing to the sense of malaise that began to pervade anthropology as the government funded academic expansion of the late 1950's and 1960's began to come to an end. In the context of the end of the traditional colonial system and the political turmoil aroused by the Vietnam War, there was a heightened concern for the ethical and political implications of research, which along with a critique of traditional theoretical and methodological approaches throughout the

social sciences, led some to speak of a “crisis in anthropology,” and to call for the “reinvention” of the disciplines (Hymes 1972).

As the actual arena in which the sense of crisis was, in large part, acted out, the Association could not but reflect and respond to its manifestations. Starting with the 1965 meeting, which took place in the aftermath of “Project Camelot,” there were a long series of highly politicized annual meetings, which after the establishment of a Committee on Organization in 1967, led to a number of modifications in the Association’s structure and functioning. These changes had the somewhat paradoxical double effect of democratizing its elected governance and strengthening its appointed national bureaucracy.

To a very great extent, the “crisis” of the late 1960’s was resolved by a process that might be called “domestication” — much of which has been, like the crisis itself, acted out through the Association. Resolutions on a variety of political topics have become standard fare at the annual meetings. Younger anthropologists teaching at non-elite universities, many of them women, began to be elected to Association office. The proliferation of adjectival anthropologists given regular places on the programs of annual meetings began to include a number that were manifestly outgrowths of the crisis years: Marxist anthropologists, Black anthropologists, humanist anthropologists, etc. One perhaps unintended consequence of such developments was a substantial increase in the service activities of the Association.

In this context, the problem of how the Association could represent the putative unity of anthropology became once again a matter of systematic concern. The issue was in fact precipitated by an Internal Revenue Service tax audit, in which the IRS called into question the Association’s tax-exempt status on the basis of a claim that the sharing of costs for administrative services the Association performed for 14 cooperating adjectival societies groups was in fact business income. After a meeting among the Presidents of the Association and its major “quadrant societies,” the Association’s Executive Board proposed a major reorganization. As originally presented, in October 1982, under the title “Adapting to Survive,” the reorganization plan would have incorporated 17 “units,” among them the “quadrant societies,” the three regional branches of the Association, and, as a kind of residual category for the 2900 anthropologists who belonged only to the Association itself, one unit

simply designated “general anthropology.” Every unit was to have to one representative for each 1000 members on a Council, which in turn would elect an Executive Board, on which the larger units would all be guaranteed membership. However, by the time an amended proposal was voted on by the Association’s membership a year later, three of the four “quadrant” societies, and another cooperating group, had voted not to join the merged group. Nevertheless, the proposed articles of incorporation for the first time specifically defined the purpose of the Association as advancing “anthropology as the science of humankind in all its aspects, through archeological, biological, ethnological and linguistic research” (*Anthropology Newsletter*, 1983, “Special Issue”:3); and the revised by-laws included shadow units in archeology, biological anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and “practicing” (i.e. applied) anthropology to replace the missing quadrant groups. In the event, the reorganization proposals passed by an 86% majority — although only 2200 of the Association’s 7400 members returned ballots. Despite 80 years of fragmenting pressures, the sacred bundle still held together.

The potency of its holistic medicine is evidenced in the reorganization discussions as recorded in the *Anthropology Newsletter*. When 29 New York City anthropologists wrote opposing the plan, it was precisely on the grounds that (with the non-participation of several quadrant societies), reorganization would promote “both administrative and intellectual division at the very time when consolidation is vital to our discipline” (1983, #6:2). And in an ironic twist, the plan was put through during the term (and with the articulate support) of Dell Hymes, who in arguing for the “reinvention of anthropology” a decade previously, had echoed Boas’ suggestion that the traditional four field constitution of the discipline was an historical accident, which a reinvented anthropology might appropriately reconsider.

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Five years later, it may still be argued that Boas’ prediction has in most respects proved correct. The resentment felt of archeologists and physical anthropologists toward sociocultural anthropologists, which Hymes suggested was less evident in the Association itself than in academic departments, is still to be found in many of those latter precincts. The meetings of the Association are still exhausting exercises

in the representation of intellectual diversity. The *American Anthropologist*, which Hymes noted was widely charged with failure “to unify the field,” is still regarded by many as virtually unreadable.

But for those who still feel that the structure of academic disciplines should, at least in principle, guarantee a place for a unified discourse about the development and diversity of humankind in all its aspects and in the broadest temporal framework, simply maintaining the symbolic importance of such a holistic viewpoint has something to recommend it — quite apart from the more practical issues of effectively representing a small profession before the larger world of scholarship, funding agencies and the general public.

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